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[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Features](#)



01. [Home](#) ▶

02. [News](#) ▼

[Local News](#)

[Features](#)

[Editorial](#)

[Commentary](#)

[Letters to Editor](#)

[News at a Glance](#)

[Business Briefs](#)

[Correction](#)

[Maui Business](#)

03. [Column](#) ▶

[Maui Crime Watch](#)

[Police Scanner](#)

[Fortune Cookie](#)

[With Aloha](#)

[Book Review](#)

[Maui Sealife](#)

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Thursday, May 18, 2006

Guardians of Haleakala

Lisa Shaw

East Maui Watershed Partnership invites students and adults on an educational and spiritual field trip through pristine rainforest.

Friday, May 12. Picture Hosmer's Grove on a cool, misty morning. The smell of eucalyptus and the sight of tall trees stretching shades of gray and violet make it hard to feel anything but peaceful, as rainforest birds chirp in the distance.

Enter 48 fourth-graders bouncing off the bus from Kamehameha School! The energy is contagious, as everyone is anxious to hike through the Waikamoi Preserve in Haleakala National Park, as guests of the East Maui Watershed Partnership (EMWP).

Maui's newest conservation fence has just been completed by EMWP, enclosing a 12,000-acre area of intact native Hawaiian rainforest high on the windward side of Haleakala. The EMWP project area is the core of the East Maui Watershed, home to many endangered species and a major source of Maui's fresh water.

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[Movie Review](#)

[Maui Movie Listings](#)

[A&E News](#)

05. [Where to Eat](#) ▶

[Island Gourmet](#)

06. [Calendar of Events](#) ▶

07. [Classifieds](#) ▶

08. [Real Estate](#) ▶

[Maui Home & Garden](#)

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09. [Contact Us](#) ▶

Ron Nagata, now chief of resources management for Haleakala National Park, also serves on EMWP's executive committee and oversaw the completion of the 17-mile fence that surrounds Haleakala's summit area and took 11 years to accomplish. The final six-plus miles of fence were completed at the beginning of May.

Kat Lui, EMWP public relations and education director, grew up in Los Angeles, so she appreciates having access to a rainforest. She shared her thoughts about the importance of EMWP for educational purposes. "Not enough schools are taking advantage of their natural resources. This is a free option for them to enhance their natural science and environmental curricula."

But students, teachers, parents, and EMWP guides are taking advantage of that opportunity on this trip, headed to Bird Loop.

Bounding down the dirt road, fourth grader Cy Leal told me facts about a carnivorous caterpillar the students had just learned about in a presentation by EMWP at their school last week. Lui and Jonathon Ciacci, field technician, explained that classroom presentations are helpful before a field trip or hike. Presentations usually consist of a PowerPoint slide show that provides an in-depth discussion about the functions of a watershed, Hawaiian rainforest ecology, and natural resource management.

Students may also get a chance to make their own watersheds, shaping and changing them from the first lava flows to speciation, to the arrival of humans, and finally to the current state of affairs today.

The kids continue to relay more of the facts they learned in the

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presentation, as I start watching out for carnivorous caterpillars at my feet.

As we enter the rainforest, the students pay respect to Hawaiian gods, chanting in the cool drizzle. Hawaiian legend indicates that this soil was the “home of the gods.” Mere mortals lived down below.

According to EMWP, “These upper watersheds are known to Hawaiians as Wao Akua, where forests were left undisturbed to supply seeds and regenerate new growth, ensuring a healthy source of water, plants and animals needed for life on Maui. These forests today still provide us with water for agriculture, lush landscapes, central to the tourism industry, and seeds to keep Hawaiian culture alive.

“Hawai’i is the endangered species capital of the world. The East Maui Watershed is home to an incredible menagerie of rare and endangered plants, birds and bugs. Protecting the watershed saves the habitat in which these unique creatures live.

“In ancient times, a kapu was placed on Wao Akua to protect it. Nowadays, a kapu is not enough. Wild pigs, goats, deer and cattle destroy the forest. Fences are built to keep them out, along with the invasive plant seeds they carry in their fur.”

We stopped at an acacia melanoxyton and listened to Lui explain how these invasive trees, along with the pine trees brought to the island, cause the native trees to suffer. The pine trees do not mature as they should anyway, since they are not getting their cue to do so from winter or fire, as they do on the Mainland.

The next topic is plant adaptation—how they protect themselves

in new circumstances and from animals that they are not naturally accustomed to. These adaptations, however, take time to evolve—and some of these species are running out of time.

We continue to learn more about Hawaiian beliefs as we stop at a pukiawe plant. Hawaiian gods used to burn this plant to reduce their mana, so they could go out to the people without their power being overwhelming. It was also burned for criminals, to rid them of bad spirits.

Ciacci described a typical week of an EMWP field technician, hiking and camping with over 50 pounds of equipment and fence, and the steep hike up and down the gulch. He said, "There will always be work in conservation, the preservation of native plants and animal control, if the funding is available. It is becoming more popular with the younger generation, which is one reason why they should learn about their environment."

We stop to listen to birds that may soon be extinct. The students chant across the gulch to other members of their class and exchange Hawaiian greetings, slapping high fives as they pass each other on the wet rocks.

I looked around at exhausted, but enthusiastic faces, as the students shared their different experiences on the hike. I thought, "How lucky we are."

The completion of EMWP's fence is a testament to the strength of a watershed partnership. Cooperation and financial support from large land owners and managers, as well as the expertise of veterans like Ron Nagata, help ensure that Wao Akua will be left undisturbed to provide for Maui's future generations.